

# VU Research Portal

## **Working ladies: Mennonite women in the enterprise of Spanish Lookout, Belize**

Roessingh, C.H.; Mol, L.

### ***published in***

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business  
2008

### ***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1504/ijesb.2008.017302](https://doi.org/10.1504/ijesb.2008.017302)

### ***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### ***citation for published version (APA)***

Roessingh, C. H., & Mol, L. (2008). Working ladies: Mennonite women in the enterprise of Spanish Lookout, Belize. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, 5(3/4), 241-256.  
<https://doi.org/10.1504/ijesb.2008.017302>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

---

## **Working ladies: Mennonite women in the enterprises of Spanish Lookout, Belize**

---

Carel Roessingh\*

Faculty of Social Sciences  
Department of Culture, Organization and Management  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
De Boelelaan 1081, Room Z-240  
1081 HV Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
Fax: +31 20 5986765  
E-mail: [ch.roessingh@fsw.vu.nl](mailto:ch.roessingh@fsw.vu.nl)  
\*Corresponding author

Linda Mol

Faculty of Social Sciences  
Department of Culture, Organization and Management  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
De Boelelaan 1081, Room Z-240  
1081 HV Amsterdam, the Netherlands

**Abstract:** This article addresses the role of women in the labour system of the Mennonite entrepreneurs in a community in Belize, Central America. The labour system of the Mennonite enterprises is mainly organised independently of the general Belizean labour system. Mennonite women have gained a pivotal position in this independent system over the past years.

Traditionally, Mennonite women stay at home to work in the domestic sphere. In recent years, however, their role has changed and they have increasingly started to work outside of the home. This has had major implications for the position of women in the community.

In this article a description of the position of women in the Mennonite labour system will be provided using literature on the Mennonite women, combined with empirical data from the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout, Belize.

**Keywords:** Belize; Mennonites; community; enterprises; labour; women.

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Roessingh, C. and Mol, L. (2008) 'Working ladies: Mennonite women in the enterprises of Spanish Lookout, Belize', *Int. J. Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, Vol. 5, Nos. 3/4, pp.241–256.

**Biographical notes:** Carel Roessingh studied Cultural Anthropology and received his PhD at the University of Utrecht. His PhD research was on the Belizean Garifuna. His current central research topic is religious entrepreneurs, focusing on the organisational activities of the Mennonites in Belize and Central America. He works as a Senior Lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Culture, Organization and Management.

Linda Mol (1976) studied Organisational Anthropology and received her Master of Arts in Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She conducted a research on Mennonite women's labour in Belize during her masteral phase.

---

## 1 Introduction

In Belize, Central America, a variety of different ethnicities live and work in peace with each other. Among these are the Maya, Garinagu, Mestizos, Creoles and other ethnic groups (Roessingh, 2001). Since the late 1950s, a group of 'white' people came to live in Belize. These members of a religious movement, called Mennonites, migrated to different places in the country to make a living as farmers. The Belizean Government was happy to receive them, because they were in need of new labour forces to help develop the country (Sawatzky, 1971).

The Mennonites are ideological descendents of a religious movement, which had its origins in the Anabaptist wing of the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe during the first half of the 16th century (Dyck, 1993; Redekop, 1989). Hostile reactions from the more established churches to Anabaptist practices such as adult baptism, non-resistance, their opinion that the church and state should be separated, and their attitude to place themselves outside the political arena, led to persecution. In response to these persecutions, large numbers of Mennonites migrated from Western Europe to Russia and Northern America in the 18th and 19th centuries, where they mainly lived as farmers in a relatively isolated manner (Dyck, 1993; Loewen, 2001; Redekop, 1989; Scott, 1996). Later, in the 20th century, groups of Mennonites moved on to countries in Latin America (Plasil and Roessingh, 2006).

The different Mennonite communities throughout the world, which also include the Amish, the Brethren and the Hutterites, share socially relevant cultural characteristics like their Anabaptist background, their history as farmers, their cultural and social repertoires, and their 'white' phenotypic features (Kraybill and Bowman, 2001). Culturally, the Mennonites are primarily inwardly focused. They have, for instance, their own schools and they speak a language called 'Plautdietsch' (low German). The Mennonites have a common coding system of attitudes and behaviour, which can be found in concepts such as the principle of 'Gelassenheit', or the submission to the will of God, which results in values such as obedience, humility and simplicity. The system of the 'Ordnung' contains common rules and discipline (Roessingh and Plasil, 2006).

The Mennonites have always been known as a hardworking and sober-living ethnic group (Jantzen, 1987). As such, they have been able to survive and make a living in the different countries where they have lived over the past 500 years, in spite of persecutions because of their religious convictions. In Belize, they are also considered to be a successful ethnic group; some even call them the economic motor of the country, which is illustrated by the Mennonite slogans in one specific colony: 'We grow Belize' and 'Dis da fu we chicken' (it is our chicken; the slogan of the main chicken abattoir in the country).

In general, when reading about Mennonite groups, we notice that most of the time it is presumed that women in these communities have a subordinate position. It is the father or the husband who has the authority in the home and in the public sphere, and it is the

mother or the wife who is supposed to stay in the house and take care of the children (Loewen, 1993; Loewen, 2002; Redekop, 1969; Redekop, 1989; Huebert Hecht, 2002). Hypothetically, one could assume that with this position in the 'hierarchy', women cannot make autonomous decisions or only have a passive role, and do not have a lot of power. But is this true? Is it true that Mennonite women stay at home most of the time and that they do not have any power in the community? Or do the women have some kind of power, which is not visible because it is situated in the domestic sphere? And to what extent have the role of Mennonite women change in the past few decades, with regard to their power position?

Bourdieu (1977) described in his book, *Outline of a theory of practice*, how the social world functions and how the people in this world interact with each other and try to achieve a major power position. According to Bourdieu (1977; 1989a; 1989b), the social world in which all humans live can be divided into smaller worlds, which he calls *fields*, e.g., networks or configurations of relationships between positions, which are being defined by their situation in a structure of different kinds of power (Brouns, 1993). A field functions as a battlefield, in which people 'fight' with each other, using different kinds of tools or *capital*. To acquire power in a certain field, people use their capital. There are different kinds of capital according to Bourdieu. He distinguishes among economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital. This article principally focuses on the last type of capital. Symbolic capital is a form of capital with which one has power, and could perform influence on others. When using the word symbolic, Bourdieu means that which is material but cannot be known as such. In this light, one could think of status, authority, prestige or a feeling for fashion (Harker, 1995). Another important concept in Bourdieu's theory of practice is the *habitus*. According to Bourdieu, structures that are important for a specific environment produce habitus: systems of sustainable, transferrable dispositions (Harker, 1995). Habitus can be defined as the frame of reference people employ when being active in a certain field. When people are present in that field, they have a specific habitus internalised, which can be helpful while being in the field.

In this article, it will be argued that the position of women in the community of Spanish Lookout has changed substantially because they increasingly work outside the domestic sphere. As such, they have gained more symbolic capital in the labour system and in the community. The central research question in this article is: How does the changing position of Mennonite women in the entrepreneurial system of their community contribute to their possession of (symbolic) capital?

After having elaborated the central research question, some methodological aspects of the empirical study will be described in the next segment. Then a theoretical overview will be provided, followed by a description of the context in which this case study needs to be placed. The empirical evidence, described in the next part of this article, will then be linked to the theoretical concepts, and finally, this article will end with a short conclusion in which an answer to the central research question will be formulated.

## 2 Methodology

The data presented in this article are the results of ethnographic research conducted in Belize from January until April 2004, combined with archival sources. This research is part of a wider and ongoing research project on the culture of Mennonite communities

in Belize, Central America, and more specifically on their entrepreneurship. So far, the research has been conducted in different periods from 2002 onwards, within four Mennonite communities in Belize (Blue Creek, Spanish Lookout, Shipyard and Springfield). These communities differ in traditionalism/conservatism, entrepreneurship and participation in businesses (Everitt, 1983).

In this research, several qualitative research methods were used to obtain information about the position of women in the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout. The research subject is approached as a case study. The research methods include participant observation, informal conversations and semistructured in-depth interviews with 20 women in different life-stages. This case study method is used to optimise understanding of one particular case, rather than providing a generalisation beyond (Stake, 2003).

Prior to the research period, a list of topics has been formulated to structure the process of data gathering. During the research period, these topics have constantly been specified and extended according to the findings, to be able to obtain the maximum amount of information. Afterwards all the results have been structured according to the final list of topics, which, in turn, have been divided into specific subtopics. Furthermore a division has been made between different types of informants and data in order to preserve the validity of the data. This process of analysis has led to the findings as presented in this article. It has to be kept in mind, however, that the present is a qualitative study, based on ethnographic field research, and that it does not in any way claim to be based upon objective, irrefutable facts (Patton, 1987). Rather, the aim of the research was to obtain an insight into, and to understand the situation of Mennonite women in Spanish Lookout, and to place these findings in a theoretical and historical context.

### 3 The role of Mennonite women in the community: an overview

In the literature on Mennonite women, the focus usually is on women's household labour or on their position in the family (Redekop, 1989; Loewen, 1993; Loewen, 2002; Loewen, 2006; Huebert Hecht, 2002). Of course, the space women have outside their domestic area depends on several circumstances. Whether a community is conservative, traditional or progressive is important; furthermore, economic changes have their influence and the degree of contact with Mennonites from other parts of the world or people who belong to the non-Mennonite world will also play a role in pushing the norms beyond the traditional borders. Redekop *et al.* (1995, p.226) note that:

“The more conservative Mennonite groups have been slower to give women equal status in ecclesiastical matters but have been more insistent and successful in maintaining social equality and economic sharing and mutuality for many generations.”

Several authors mention women who work outside of the home, but descriptions of these situations generally tend to refer to the USA or Canada, where many Mennonites live and where a lot of studies have been conducted (for example, Schmidt *et al.*, 2002). According to these studies, these Mennonites (usually living in increasingly mixed communities instead of pure Mennonite communities) also participate in the modern world and women work outside of the home in companies owned by non-Mennonites, or companies that do not relate to farming (Schmidt, 2002; Loewen, 2002; Loewen, 2006).

Kraybill and Nolt (1995) note in a study about Amish enterprises in the USA that more than 50% of the single Amish women work outside their homes in jobs such as domestic help, restaurant staff, retail clerks and teachers, while the married women mostly work part-time or stay at home. The increasing importance of entrepreneurship is one of the reasons Kraybill and Nolt give for the fact that there are more women on the labour market.

“The arrival of entrepreneurship has pushed some homekeepers beyond traditional borders. The first foray of women into business was largely under the umbrellas of their husbands.” (Kraybill and Nolt, 1995, p.240)

Loewen (2006) has written on Mennonite women labour in Meade County, Kansas, USA. He describes women labour in this community over a period of 30 years (1945–1975). During this period women labour has developed from farm work, to household work, to work outside of the community. This pattern of women labour can be described as a:

“U-shaped pattern of female productive activity – from relatively high in the pre-industrial household economy, to a lower level in the industrial economies, to a higher level with the development of the modern tertiary section.” (Tilly and Scott, 1978, p.229)

The argument goes that the social context of a pioneer or frontier family farm gave women an important level of power and status, however, this position “was lost as agriculture became more commercialized and technologized and as urbanization undermined the old farm community” (Loewen, 2002, p.260). In the time when farms were not as mechanically organised as they are nowadays, women’s helping hands were needed on the farms. They worked together with their husbands and children on the farms, helping with harvesting or milking cows. Then, in the 1950s, trucks, tractors and combines were introduced in the farm work. However, these machines were used exclusively by men. As such, women were no longer needed on the farm (at least not for the heavy work) and thus women’s domain transferred primarily to the house and kitchen. The women in their renewed role as housewives could at this time be described as ‘cheerful homemakers’, dedicating themselves to their household, nurturing their children and new forms of leisure (Loewen, 2002, pp.265–272). In the 1970s, women acquired more kitchen utensils and, as a result, they had more free time. With this new development, women had the opportunity to go to work in a company, for example in a hairdresser’s salon or as a cleaner at somebody else’s home, while still being able to fulfil their domestic duties. As there was more spare time, they no longer needed to confine themselves to their homes; they could now enter the more ‘worldly’ world.

Next to the development that women were no longer needed on the farm and that they therefore transferred to the domestic sphere, another development took place simultaneously owing to the increasing use of modern technologies. Because of technological developments, a new kind of business emerged, next to the traditional farming industry. Increasingly, the members of the Mennonite communities started to develop alternative (farm-related) entrepreneurial activities. This meant that there were more labour opportunities, not only for men but also for women (Loewen, 1983). These women, as has been explained before, had more spare time owing to technological aids in the household. As a result, more and more women went to work outside their homes and even outside their community (Schmidt, 2002). Driedger (2000) states that different processes of modernisation like urbanisation also have influenced the position of women

not only in the labour system but also within the church and the community. Based on a survey of 3000 respondents from the more progressive North American Mennonite groups, Kauffman and Driedger (1991, p.114) conclude that:

“A very significant trend is the increased employment of Mennonite women. The employment of all women went from 45% in 1972 to 56% in 1989. In both years many of these were employed only part time.”

Women were no longer bound solely to working at the farm or in the house. A growing number of Mennonite women took on jobs in different companies, or initiated all kinds of entrepreneurial activities.

So far this is the overview of some of the studies on Mennonite women in North America. In the next segment the case study of the *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites of Spanish Lookout will be introduced. The question is whether the situation in Spanish Lookout is comparable with that of the Mennonites in North America. Before we continue with the discussion of the aforementioned theoretical issues, a general historical overview of the Spanish Lookout community will be provided.

#### **4 Spanish Lookout: a Mennonite community in western Belize**

The Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout in the Cayo district of Belize originated in Ukraine. The first Mennonite who came to Spanish Lookout were followers of the *Kleine Gemeinde* congregation. This congregation separated from the *Molotschna* church community in 1804. The history of the Mennonites has always been one of separation and migration. In 1812 a young minister named Klaas Reimer opposed the contributions of the Mennonite community in Russia to the Russian Government in the war against Napoleon (Plett, 1999).

“Finding little response in the church, he began meeting separately with like-minded members in 1812, and by 1814 they were organized as a separate group. The others mockingly called this conservative minority group the *Kleine Gemeinde* (small church), a name which the group itself soon accepted fully as indeed indicating the true nature of the faithful church in a hostile world.” (Dyck, 1993, p.179)

In those days, this congregation was known for its conservative attitude. In 1874, the *Kleine Gemeinde* migrated to Manitoba, Canada, and Nebraska, USA, as a response to the increasing pressure of the Russian Government on the Mennonite schools and the fear that young Mennonite men would have to fulfil military service. In 1948, a group of members of the *Kleine Gemeinde* left Canada for Chihuahua and Durango in Mexico, to avoid the total integration of their school system into a larger Canadian educational programme (Reimer, 1949). This integration of their educational system into a ‘worldly’ one was seen as a direct threat for the Mennonites’ social and religious identity and formed the main reason to leave the country.

But because the Mexican Government proclaimed its intention to incorporate the Mennonites into a national Social Security system, the Mennonites in Mexico were again confronted with a dilemma. Some of the Mennonites made the decision to move on. Ten years after their migration to Mexico, *Kleine Gemeinde* members and some other Mennonite groups moved away from Mexico to Belize (Driedger, 1958; Sawatzky, 1971). This move, however, was also caused by internal tensions between members of

the community and church leaders, and in other cases simply because of shortage of land (Jantzen, 1989; Redekop, 1969). The Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites' migration was the result of an agreement made on the 16th of December 1957 between the government of British Honduras and a delegation of the Quellen Colony in Chihuahua and Durango in northern Mexico.

In March 1958 a group of 680 Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites arrived to settle at the banks of the Belize River at a place that the Belizeans called Spanish Lookout (Higdon, 1997; Quiring, 1961; Sawatzky, 1971; Roessingh, 2007). The Mennonites' first years in Belize were difficult and full of new experiences. The description of Koop (1991, p.vii), a prominent Mennonite member in Spanish Lookout, in his book *The Pioneer Years in Belize*, gives a dramatic picture:

“After a weary and tiring journey, they arrived on the southern bank of the Belize River at the present side of Spanish Lookout's southern edge. Neither bridge nor ferry awaited them. On the northern bank of the river was a dark and forbidding jungle with its strange noises and smells. Underneath the dense bush, giant snakes and jaguars made their home. The apprehensive settlers may have had thoughts akin to those of the Children of Israel in Numbers 14:3: ‘Why did the Lord bring us to this land to allow us to fall by the sword (tropical diseases)? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Would it not have been better for us to return to Egypt?’”

The description of Koop indicates the drastic changes in environment and agricultural methods the Mennonites faced after they arrived in the Cayo district, from the northern part of Mexico. Both Jantzen (1989) and Snider (1980) emphasise the difficulties the farmers had to overcome in the early years of their presence in Belize. Not only did the climate and the dense jungle give them a hard time, but they also had to adopt a new technique, the slash-and-burn technique, to cultivate the environment with its ‘heavy gumbo soil’ (Snider, 1980, p.19). In addition to this, Driedger (1958) and Snider (1980) note that the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite farmers had to grow other kinds of crops (maize and beans) than they were used to in Manitoba and Mexico, where they grew oats and wheat.

Nowadays, the Spanish Lookout settlement in the Cayo district in western Belize, is known as a progressive Mennonite settlement (Roessingh and Schoonderwoerd, 2005). When driving into the community, one seems to enter a different world within Belize. Visitors who come to Spanish Lookout to buy something at the Farmers Trading Center, a self-service and the main store in the community, frequently suggest that the settlement could be compared with the agricultural area of the mid-west of Northern America. The community has developed into an extensive area with farms surrounded by numerous acres of land. What used to be a dense jungle is now a hilly area with pastures where the Mennonites raise cattle and cultivate corn and beans. Within the community one will find important agribusinesses such as Friesen Hatcheries, Reimers Feedmill, Quality Poultry Products, Western Tractor Supply, Western Dairies and Bel Car Export. The latter is an important company in Belize, because next to importing beans it also exports beans throughout the Caribbean. Beside this, there are several hardware stores such as Hillside Welding Center, or Universal Hardware, and other companies, such as Pletts Home Builders and Loewen Furniture.

Notable in the case of the Mennonites is that an ethnic group, which, culturally, acts in a rather isolated way within the multiethnic society of Belize, was capable of establishing a strong economic position in this country. In fact, the Mennonites are



commonly regarded as the economic motor of Belize. Mennonites symbolise soundness and reliability and for that Belizeans are eager to do business with them. This is especially true for the Mennonites of Spanish Lookout. Hall (1980) mentions some cultural factors, which explain the economic success of this community and its enterprises. These factors are group cohesion, homogeneity, pervasive religion, a high degree of social organisation, a self-sufficient economy, and a low threshold for migration. Many of the Spanish Lookout Mennonites maintain a network that operates transnationally. These networks consist of extended families, religious brotherhoods or organisations in different Mennonite communities, in countries such as Canada, the USA and Mexico. Obviously these networks, like other networks, bring about changes on different levels, such as modern or better machines, or cultural changes. Particularly this last level of change is relevant in the light of this case study.

In the next section the focus will be on changes in women's labour in the entrepreneurial system of Spanish Lookout, which is a schism with the position women held a couple of decades ago.

## **5 Women's labour in an entrepreneurial context**

When Belizean people go to Spanish Lookout to do their grocery and hardware shopping, they go to the one place where they can buy all the things they need for their daily living: the Farmers Trading Center. This is a grocery store and a wholesale retail centre in one. The Farmers Trading Center is a cooperative and headed by a Mennonite cooperative committee which, on its part has a responsibility to its Mennonite shareholders in Spanish Lookout. Entering the Farmers Trading Center, one can see a lot of young girls and women who work at different parts of the store: they fill and clean shelves, help customers from behind a counter, work as cash registers and help people find shoes and materials for making clothes. Seeing a lot of women work in a business or in schools is a common sight nowadays. However, only a few decades ago, the daily life in Spanish Lookout looked completely different.

When the Mennonites initially came to Spanish Lookout in 1958, there were only jungle and forests. The families who arrived, first had to work very hard to make the place suitable for living. They had to clear the land, build houses and create farms. Once this work was done, they tried to live a structured life: the men worked on the farms, the women worked inside the homes and took care of children and household. In general the Mennonites families in Spanish Lookout include (besides a father and a mother) five or more children. Sometimes women helped their husbands on the farms when it was needed, just as their children did. Mennonites do not make a distinction between paid work and unpaid work. Both need to be done, and both take a lot of time. It is just that the woman generally occupies the home domain; and the husband, the public domain or the work outside of the home. So a woman who stays at home to take care of the household, the children and her husband, also works.

The daily life of a married Mennonite woman in Spanish Lookout in those days was very structured and did not vary much from one week to another. On Monday, women did their laundry; on Friday, they baked bread and buns; on Saturday, women cleaned their houses so that they would be clean for Sunday: church day and visiting day. The rest of the time women spent cooking, doing needlework, doing the dishes, sweeping the house and the veranda, baking pies and cake, gardening, and so on. The girls, who helped

their mothers, and married women spent most of their time at home, taking care of the family, as well as of the extended family and neighbours or other people in the community who needed help. Some unmarried women worked in the few companies that existed, for example, the Farmers Trading Center or Quality Poultry Products, but most of them worked at home or at the farm.

The life of a Mennonite women in Spanish Lookout, seemingly, has not changed much compared to some 30 or 40 years ago. Women still do needlework, spend a lot of time cooking, baking and doing the dishes and laundry. A lot of young girls help their mothers or other families around the house, when they have finished school. One woman described what her life looks like:

In the morning I get up, make breakfast for the family. And being ready for whatever the day brings. For example canning unexpectedly for people, or going with my husband together to the city, to town; it can be cattle work with my husband. Then I also ride a horse and help him. I've been doing that for a couple of years. And making bread and baking is one of the things I do. [...] We did a lot of butchering, me and my husband, but we stopped it three years ago. [...] We did pork and beef, and we did everything from killing the animals until it was ready to eat, like steaks and ground beef. We stopped it, because it involved everybody of the family, and others started asking the girls for help [to work somewhere else]. We also had a machine shop, and that gave us more money. Then I'm sowing, plenty. I'm still doing it besides the butchering too. I also do canning food for others, vegetables, meat and fruit.

But some changes, which have started approximately 10 to 20 years ago, can be witnessed at this moment. One of the changes is the introduction of electricity and running water in the community. Before Spanish Lookout obtained electricity, women had to do the laundry manually, without any machines and this took much more time than nowadays, with a lot of women having laundry machines. Cooking was done with burning wood instead of with stoves, so everything was more complicated and time-consuming. Today, women dispose of many domestic (electrical) appliances, which make the housework easier: microwaves, refrigerators, blenders, vacuum cleaners, stoves, washing machines (although many do the washing partly with their hands because some washing machines are not fully automatic), lawn mowers, *etc.* Furthermore, running, hot water is available which makes life more comfortable. Telephones and cars have made their entry, reducing the time it takes to speak to someone or to visit the neighbours: people just ring or take the car.

Another change is the disappearing of gardening as an activity of the housewife. Before the commercialisation of household goods, many women had their own gardens in which they planted vegetables and fruits for consumption. Nowadays, women can go to the Farmers Trading Center to buy fruit and vegetables, usually grown by native Belizean people who live in the surrounding, small villages outside Spanish Lookout. With the disappearing of gardening as an important activity, and the reduction in time needed for other domestic duties, women now have more time to do other things.

A cause for change that is indirectly caused by North American influences is the foundation of other churches in the community. The Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church (EMMC) was established in Spanish Lookout some eight years ago. It is the second largest church in Spanish Lookout. The EMMC has its headquarters in Manitoba, Canada. Like the Kleine Gemeinde church, the EMMC is also seen as a progressive church. However, the ideas of the EMMC seem less strict and they give the impression

that they have a more open view towards the outside world. Although the Kleine Gemeinde church represents the majority of the inhabitants, the influence of the EMMC on matters of daily practice should not be underestimated. In practice, this means that EMMC women are able to push the norms beyond the traditional borders and change some of the established rules. This also affects the lives of Kleine Gemeinde women.

And last but not least, the growing number of enterprises in the last 20 years has had its effects on women labour. A lot of the farmers tried to expand their activities outside farming. There are a number of explanations for this new development: not every son of a farmer wishes to be a farmer or to take over his father's farm. Another explanation is that the amount of land is limited; not everybody can possess as much land as one wishes. Owing to these changes in mentality and to environmental developments, people began to create agriculture-related enterprises: the Mennonites started the Friesen Hatcheries, the Western Dairies, Quality Poultry Products, the Farmers Trading Center, Reimers Feed Mill, Bel Car and so on. The increase of enterprises over the years resulted in a growth of employment. More people were needed to help in the entrepreneurial system, for example, administrative tasks. Thus, more women entered the labour market, in contrast to 30 or 40 years ago, when most women stayed at home to work in the domestic sphere or on the family farm, and only a few unmarried girls worked in companies such as the Farmers Trading Center (which, at that time was not a self-service yet), Quality Poultry Products, or on the corn fields. Nowadays the work of women is much more dispersed and visible. This is the big difference: more girls and young women (and some older unmarried women) work in several companies, although usually in typically 'woman jobs', e.g., office work, cleaning work, domestic help, nursing work and so on. The former has significant influence on the position of women within the community. Their roles have changed and thus they gained symbolic capital.

### 5.1 *Girls and young, unmarried women*

When a young girl is born, she grows up in a close family. Young girls can be children, they play with other children and sometimes they help their mothers in the household. From their seventh until their 14th birthday they go to school, where they, just like the boys, are taught Bible class, mathematics, languages (English and German, the language of the Bible), and social studies. Some girls help their mothers with the housework after school, but this is usually restricted/limited.

Once a girl has turned 14 and when school is finished, there are two possibilities: either a girl stays at home to work in the household of her mother, or she will work outside of the home, for example in the clinic, the Farmers Trading Center, or as domestic help. These days, a lot of girls or young women are teachers at the elementary schools of Spanish Lookout. This is a big change compared to 15 years ago: at the time, mostly male teachers were employed in schools. Nowadays, young women can teach independently, although this is usually limited to teaching the youngest children. Male teachers are predominantly teaching the older children, in the highest grades. Some girls work at other people's houses in the household, when help is needed in a certain family (because there are many young children, when a new baby has been born, or when somebody is ill). But this happens less and less frequently. One explanation for this is that girls can earn more money in other jobs than in household work, so it gets harder to find girls who are willing to help those families with the housework. Nevertheless, this

job is regarded as a training facility, a job that teaches young women how to manage a family life in the future. A mother with five children, one of whom sometimes works as an aid in the household of other families, said the following:

It's a more lowly job, working at other people's house. And most girls don't enjoy working for other people. There they'll learn how life is. If I had a bigger family, I would not let them work outside of the home. But since I have a small family, they have to learn it here.

For young girls, work is usually seen as an opportunity to learn about life and to prepare her for being a mother and housewife in the future. People do not want their young daughters to stay at home, doing nothing. A male teacher said the following about this:

Parents would gladly have their children do something nice, not spending idle time at home.

Then there is another change that can be observed recently: more and more girls, who have already finished the eighth grade of elementary school, want to continue learning. Maybe not for very long, but at least until they get married. With more educational background, young women can exercise different, and more complex professions than they could otherwise. Since about ten years, a high school in Spanish Lookout, which is managed by the Mennonites, meets the demand for higher education, not only for boys but also for girls. Usually, young people in the age of 14 to 16 attend this school for one or two years before they start working. Besides this opportunity, it is possible that girls start taking home schooling from the USA. They can order the books and courses through the internet, and make online exams. In this way, young women can work inside as well as outside of the home, while simultaneously being able to follow courses and improve their level of education. Some girls expressed a desire to become (registered) nurses and through this home schooling they have the possibility to obtain more knowledge on the subject of nursing.

It is to be expected that in the near future, seven or eight years of education in elementary school will not be enough anymore if one wants to work in a company in Spanish Lookout; obtaining more formal education can help girls and young women anticipating this situation. The fact that an increasing number of young women want more formal education, allows us to cast a glance at the future: perhaps the women will increasingly want to work longer than before, maybe they will even want to continue working after marriage, and thus this might become more common and accepted.

Concluding, it can be said that even though more and more young women work outside of the home, in the future the main role of a girl will likely remain to be situated within the home, especially after marriage. But with the growing importance of education, the position of young women will probably change, in the sense that women will possibly continue working for a longer time and that work will gain in importance in the lives of Mennonite women in Spanish Lookout. Again, this also affects their position within the Mennonite community.

## *5.2 Married women*

Usually a young woman continues working until she gets married. Most of the time these marriages will occur between the age of 20 and 25, but it can also be at an older (and sometimes younger) age, or it might not happen at all. Once the young woman is married,

her labour moves almost always exclusively to the household. Working at home requires much time, as the labour is very intensive in this community. Many Mennonite women make clothes by themselves. They prefer sewing instead of buying, which is more expensive. The economic situation in Belize is not favourable and the wages are not very high. Buying goods in a store is expensive and many Mennonites, as they live soberly according to their philosophy of life, prefer making clothes themselves, which, as a result, takes more time.

As was said, Mennonite women can be occupied one day after another in the household, from early morning until late in the evening. One woman explained that she starts doing the laundry at three o'clock in the morning on Monday. She is an exception in doing this, but it indicates the hard work of a female member of the community.

Only if a young married woman would be 'bored' at home, would it be possible that she would stay or go working outside of the home. Five years ago, this was hardly ever seen. It does not occur very often that a recently married Mennonite woman will search for work outside of the home; but it does happen that she remains working where she worked before marriage, as is the case of this 30-year-old woman:

Five years ago, it was very strange to continue working after your marriage. There was another one who did it. Yeah, it was kind of strange. But now, S. and M. [two women working at the Farmers Trading Center] are working too. [...] I continued working because I wanted to. And we had made a loan to buy the house, and we decided not to have children right away. My sister also encouraged it, because she wished she had had the opportunity to continue working after her marriage.

This young Mennonite woman continued working at the Farmers Trading Center, because the managers asked her to help out one day in the week; furthermore she and her husband could use the extra money, and she wanted to continue working. She does not have any children yet, so she has spare time to work outside of the home.

It also happens that a young woman helps her husband in his work, like in the earlier days when a woman helped her husband teach or farm. But once children are born, women stay at home to take care of them and of the household. As can be observed in Spanish Lookout, there is not much time to work outside of the home once children are born. Most women even disapprove of women who work when they have babies. They want to take care of the children themselves; why have children if you want to work outside of the home? One woman who does not have children yet, is very clear about work after having babies:

Once I have children I will not work anymore. I think children need the mother or the father to take care of them. I could hire someone, but I would prefer taking care of them myself. [...] After marriage it's OK [to work]. But when they have children, the parents should raise their children instead of hiring someone else.

This opinion is shared by women of all ages: from 15-year-old girls to older women. Some women resume work once they are older, or when the children have grown up and do not need their mother as much as when they were babies. Many forms of woman labour activity can be found in Spanish Lookout. Some women even start and manage their own small enterprise. A woman with three children, who is a seamstress and sews clothes for people as her job, explained that she gains money with this work, and thanks to this, she and her husband are able to finance their future house and car. Another Mennonite woman, 39-years-old, makes quilts at home together with a couple of other

women, which she sells to tourists, who regularly visit Spanish Lookout and also her house to look at her work. Quilting has always been a typically Mennonite activity: while quilting together with 9 or 12 women, they have the opportunity to socialise with each other. Yet another woman manages a health food store together with her husband, where people from the community, as well as from outside of Spanish Lookout, buy their vitamins, tea and creams. A final example is the wife of a minister. She does the laundry for a welding shop for which she earns some extra money. The aforementioned examples are only a few among many other forms of female activity.

In short: slowly, one by one, married Mennonite women enter the labour market. This usually occurs when a woman has recently been married and does not have children yet. Sometimes she does not have a lot of work to do at home, and in this situation she is able to work outside of the home in, for example, the company where she worked before she got married. She can work from her house, as a seamstress or as a baker, when she has small children. Once the children are older, it would be possible for a woman to reenter the labour market. This does not happen much at present, but most women do not stand to reject it right away. It might happen more in the future, when more enterprises arise and more people are needed on the labour market, especially for tasks that are suitable for women, thus for which they possess specific symbolic capital, as nurses, teachers, cooks, administrators and so on.

## **6 Conclusion**

If we compare our case study with the literature on Mennonite women in North America, some of the changes can also be witnessed in the Mennonite settlement of Spanish Lookout, even though the lives of women are still very different from their sisters in North America. True, the Mennonites of Belize originally came from Northern America (Canada), but they left in the 1940s because of differing opinions: they wanted to keep their way of living as they had always done, and did not want to adapt their norms and values to modernity as the other Mennonites who stayed in Canada often did (Sawatzky, 1971). Neither did they want to accept the new school system Canada wanted to impose upon them. The Mennonites who left Canada (including the Kleine Gemeinde community that moved to Belize) were more traditional, and as such experienced a different development than the Mennonites who stayed in Northern America.

Women labour within the Mennonite communities that moved to Belize also stayed more traditional. Even though a lot of women work before they get married, and even though they enjoy to work and see it as a useful activity, a lot of women stop working when they get married. Most of the women think that it is their duty to be good mothers and housewives to the family in which they live. This is based on a chapter in the Bible, saying that a good housewife takes good care of her husband and children, works virtuously and is never idle (Proverbs 31: 10–31). As the Mennonites of Spanish Lookout try to live as much as possible according to the Scripture, they interpret this Bible verse in such a way that a wife, when married or when having children, should stay at home to take care of the children, husband and household. The most important function of a woman is being a mother and besides that, wife and housewife. Nevertheless, community changes have also occurred in Spanish Lookout. More and more young girls go out to work in a big cooperation or at the dairies, after finishing school at the age of 14. One of

the reasons to conduct research in this community was to see in what way the situation in Belize resembled the situation as described in some studies on North American Mennonites. As we have shown in this article, Mennonite women in Spanish Lookout stay as housewives and mothers for the pivotal part of their lives, but work outside of the home has gained importance and is increasingly being valued.

Although there have been many changes in women's labour over the past 30 to 40 years, a lot of Mennonite women stick to the traditional role of women in the house. One might think that this is an old-fashioned mindset; however, a lot of Mennonite women still think that staying at home when having a family is the only right way to handle it. One of the young female teachers said that she did not know why women should have children, if they were going to work after the delivery. 'Why have children, if you do not want to take care of them?' This opinion is widespread, according to the research data.

But, of course, there are exceptions to the general rule of staying at home when married or having children. The example of a married woman of 30 years was provided earlier. This lady agreed on a more liberal mindset that women could work when they are married or have children. She thinks that it should be the decision of a married couple, if a woman continues working after marriage or delivery. This woman had been working for 11 years in a company in Spanish Lookout, and continued working there after her marriage. At first she wanted to stop after her marriage, but as it was still possible for her to work there, she and her husband agreed that she would continue working there. Although the example of this young married woman is an exception to the rule, this does, at the very least, indicate that changes are occurring. She now is just one of the few women who continue working after their marriage, but it might be expected that this number will increase in the future, and that the position Mennonite women hold in the community will continue to change.

In the beginning of this article, Bourdieu's field theory and the notion of symbolic capital was mentioned. Overall, processes of modernisation have led to the creation of new fields. Within these fields a new 'fight' for capital is being fought. This led to a changing position of Mennonite women. Especially in the entrepreneurial system they have gained more (symbolic) capital, but also in the church and community their position has changed. However, there is no evidence so far that these developments have increased women's political capital in the Mennonite community.

What can be concluded in this regard when we look specifically at the case of the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout? Although the modernisation processes are not as highly developed as in North America, it can be stated that the women of Spanish Lookout have a specific kind of symbolic capital: they are very suitable for some typically 'female' jobs such as working at the clinic, working in offices, or as a domestic help. When more women find themselves in the labour market, the public sphere so to speak, they show more of themselves outside of the home. And with the improvement of the educational level of young women, who might work longer outside of the home than before, they gain a pivotal position in the entrepreneurial system of this community. It will probably take a long time (if ever) before they will have the same role as the male members have, but their position is gaining importance. This can be considered as symbolic capital: it is not tangible, but with specific knowledge, women can play an important role in the world, which traditionally belongs to men more than to women.

Female participation in the labour process was introduced in the Spanish Lookout community only about five years ago; before that, none of the women worked outside the home when they start a family. Nowadays, some Mennonite women actively participate

in the labour process after their marriage. It is still not accepted that women work when they have (young) children. Sometimes we heard women say that only if a child does not need the mother as much as how a baby does, she should be allowed to work. But this does not happen regularly and even though some share this point of view, it is doubtful that this will happen on a wide scale in the near future. Most importantly, Spanish Lookout is a religious community, and traditional values are (still) very important for the common mindset. As long as this mindset does not change, the position Mennonite women have in the community will probably not change as much as it did in the Western world after the introduction of secularisation and individualisation.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989a) 'Economisch kapitaal, cultureel kapitaal, sociaal kapitaal', in P. Bourdieu (Ed.) *Opstellen over smaak, habitus en het veldbegrip (gekozen door Dick Pels)*, Amsterdam: Van Gennep, pp.120–142.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989b) 'Social space and symbolic power', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp.14–26.
- Brouns, M. (1993) *De homo economicus als winkeldochter. Theorieën over arbeid, macht en sekse*, Amsterdam: SUA.
- Driedger, L. (1958) 'From Mexico to British Honduras', *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp.160–166.
- Driedger, L. (2000) *Mennonites in the Global Village*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Dyck, C.J. (1993) *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, 3rd ed., Scottdale: Herald Press.
- Everitt, J.C. (1983) 'Mennonites in Belize', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp.82–93.
- Hall, J.A. (1980) 'A summary of the findings gained from an analysis of the development and agricultural productivity of the Kleine Gemeinde agricultural system at Spanish Lookout, Belize', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp.323–336.
- Harker, H. (1995) *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu*, Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press.
- Higdon, F.X. (1997) 'Farm diversification and specialization: the adaptation of Mennonite households in Spanish Lookout, Belize', PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.
- Huebert Hecht, L.A. (2002) 'Speaking up and taking risks. Anabaptist family and household roles in sixteenth-century Tirol', in K.D. Schmidt, D. Zimmerman Umble and S.D. Reschley (Eds.) *Strangers at Home. Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp.238–258.
- Jantzen, C.R. (1987) 'From the Maya to the Mennonites: intercommunity relationships in West-Central Belize', *América Indígena*, Vol. XLVII, No. 1, pp.169–191.
- Jantzen, C.R. (1989) 'The Mennonites of Spanish Lookout', *The World & I*, June, pp.665–673.
- Kauffman, J.H. and Driedger, L. (1991) *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization*, Scottdale: Herald Press.
- Koop, G.S. (1991) *Pioneer Years in Belize*, Published by G.S. Koop.
- Kraybill, D.B. and Bowman, C.F. (2001) *On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kraybill, D.B. and Nolt, S.M. (1995) *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Loewen, R.K. (1983) *Blumenort. A Mennonite Community in Transition*, Steinbach: The Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society.



- Loewen, R.K. (1993) *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850–1930*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Loewen, R.K. (2001) *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s*, Manitoba: The University of Manitoba Press.
- Loewen, R.K. (2002) 'Household, coffee klatsch, and office. The evolving worlds of mid-twentieth-century Mennonite women', in K.D. Schmidt, D. Zimmerman Umble and S.D. Reschly (Eds.) *Strangers at Home. Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp.259–283.
- Loewen, R.K. (2006) *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth-Century Rural Disjuncture*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Patton, M.Q. (1987) *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, Newbury Park: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Plasil, T. and Roessingh, C. (2006) 'Food and the community: the role of sharing a meal among the Mennonites of Shipyard, Belize', *Belizean Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp.42–56.
- Plett, D.F. (1999) *Saints and Sinners: The Kleine Gemeinde in Imperial Russia 1818 to 1875*, Steinbach: Crossway Publications.
- Quiring, W. (1961) 'Mennonites in British Honduras', *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp.10–13.
- Redekop, C. (1969) *The Old Colony Mennonites. Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Redekop, C. (1989) *Mennonite Society*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Redekop, C., Ainlay, S.C. and Siemens, R. (1995) *Mennonite Entrepreneurs*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Reimer, P.J.B. (1949) 'From Russia to Mexico: the story of the Kleine Gemeinde', *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp.28–32.
- Roessingh, C. (2001) *The Belizean Garifuna: Organization of Identity in an Ethnic Community in Central America*, Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers.
- Roessingh, C. (2007) 'Mennonite communities in Belize', *International Journal Business and Globalisation*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp.107–124.
- Roessingh, C. and Plasil, T. (2006) 'From collective body to individual mind: religious change in an old colony Mennonite Community in Belize', *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 24, pp.57–74.
- Roessingh, C. and Schoonderwoerd, A. (2005) 'Traditional farmers or modern businessmen? Religious differentiation and entrepreneurship in a Kleine Gemeinde Community in Belize', *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp.65–77.
- Sawatzky, H.L. (1971) *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schmidt, K.D. (2002) 'Schism. Where women's outside work and insider dress collided', in K.D. Schmidt, D. Zimmerman Umble and S.D. Reschly (Eds.) *Strangers at Home. Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp.208–233.
- Schmidt, K.D., Zimmerman Umble, D. and Reschly, S.D. (Eds.) (2002) *Strangers at Home. Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Scott, S. (1996) *An Introduction to Old Order and Conservative Mennonite Groups*, Intercourse: Good Books.
- Snider, H. (1980) 'Agriculture in the Kleine Gemeinde Community of Spanish Lookout Belize', *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp.19–24.
- Stake, R.E. (2003) 'Case studies', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp.134–164.
- Tilly, L. and Scott, J. (1978) *Women, Work and Family*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.